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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000358

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, DRL/NESCA FOR JESSICA MEGILL  
LONDON FOR TSOU, PARIS FOR WALLER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/20/2019  
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE MICHEL KILO RELEASED FROM  
PRISON

Classified By: CDA, a.i. Raymond Maxwell for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Syrian State Security released prominent political dissident Michel Kilo on the evening of May 19 after he completed a three-year prison sentence for spreading false information, weakening the national sentiments, and inciting sectarianism. Kilo had been a signatory to the Damascus-Beirut Declaration in 2006 and the principle drafter of the Damascus Declaration. Sixty-eight years old and suffering kidney troubles, Kilo was unable to prevail in his appeal for early release for good behavior, but his release surprised many democracy activists and diplomats, who expected the Syrian regime to charge him with new crimes to keep him in jail. The day after his release, Kilo gave a phone interview to BBC Arabic. END SUMMARY.

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Kilo Healthy  
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¶2. (C) A small group of family and friends gathered at the Kilo residence in the Christian Quarter of Damascus on the evening of May 19 to welcome Michel Kilo home from Adra prison. He had been transferred from Adra prison to the custody of the General Intelligence Directorate (GID) on May 15 and held until his final release. Kilo, who served three years for weakening the national sentiment, spreading false information, and inciting sectarianism, appeared in good health and delighted with his freedom, according to an Embassy LES who was on hand for the reception. The LES reported that Kilo claimed to have exercised for two hours every day and have eaten healthily in prison. Kilo did, however, complain about kidney pain.

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Final Hour of Custody  
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¶3. (C) In the final hour of his GID custody, Kilo was taken to the GID Director Ali Mamluk's office, whereupon he was blindfolded, handcuffed, and left standing for over half an hour, Kilo reported. Then, in what the LES described as a "bit of theater," a brigadier general who heads a branch of GID entered the room and shouted, "why is this man cuffed and blindfolded?" The general rushed to remove the blind-fold and handcuffs from Kilo, and after dismissing his deputy, proceeded to debrief Kilo. (Comment: We were unable to determine whether Mamluk was present during any part of the general's interview with Kilo. End Comment)

¶4. (C) The general told Kilo he was free to resume his "normal life, including his writing" Kilo said. He did warn Kilo against conducting any interviews with "satellite news

stations." Kilo also claimed to have informed the general that he planned to sue everyone who had questioned his patriotism in published press articles. When the general asked Kilo if he needed any assistance, which the LES presumed meant money, Kilo reportedly joked, "I still have the \$1 million," drawing laughter from the General. (Note: The \$1 million refers to a news report soon after Kilo's detention in which Maria Makhluf, a news anchor on the Lebanese New TV station program "Without Censor," accused Kilo of having taken \$1 million from former Vice President and National Salvation Front founder Abd al-Halim Khaddam.

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Kilo Talks to BBC Arabic  
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15. (C) Despite the general's warning, Kilo gave a telephone interview to BBC Arabic on the afternoon of May 20. Kilo pointedly remarked he had not "signed any documents," presumably a reference to rumors that the SARG would demand a signed apology to President al-Asad. Kilo said he felt he had been detained because of his role in the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, but that there were other "indirect reasons" for his arrest as well. He added that he would continue to serve both his country and its citizens by striving for greater liberties. "My imprisonment has not changed any of my beliefs," he said.

16. (C) COMMENT: While his release does not represent a victory for human rights activists, it certainly ran contrary to the prevailing view of human rights and diplomatic contacts that the Syrian regime would charge Kilo with new crimes to keep him in jail. We anticipate Kilo's homecoming

will still be celebrated widely. We have heard contradictory reports from European contacts on whether their respective governments or the E.U. would issue a statement "welcoming Kilo's release." While doing so would provide a positive response, it would be likely to beg the question of our views on Kilo's arrest and sentence, as well as our view on the continuing detention of other prisoners of conscience. Washington might consider if-asked press guidance that made these points and noted the decision to release Kilo was a good first step. Post recommends any statement should generally welcome the release of Michel Kilo. We would not recommend a statement that drew negative attention to the SARG or used Kilo's release as an opportunity for singling out other political detainees. END COMMENT.  
MAXWELL